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The Native American Presence In Mary Oliver's Poetry

Robin Riley Fast

Mary Oliver's poetry offers European-American readers a way of responding to Native Americans and the past we share with them that both acknowledges the history and consequences of colonization and uses that knowledge to start moving beyond the limits of cultural bias and individual disaffection. Yet, as she does not presume to speak for Indians, neither does she claim to have all the answers for whites, and her own approach raises questions. Nonetheless, she suggests compellingly some of the promising implications of openness to Indian realities and influences, as her poems trace one person's liberation from the confines of stereotypes and guilt over the devastation of Indian lands and lives.

A strong sense of place, and of identity in relation to it, is central to her poetry. Her poems are firmly located in the places where she has lived or travelled, particularly her native Ohio and New England; her moments of transcendence arise organically from the realities of swamp, pond, woods, and shore. The vital importance of nature and of native or adopted places, however, renders acute her discomfort about how her forebears came to be established in Ohio, and about how white Europeans in general established themselves on this continent—by evicting the Indians for whom, too, a sense of self was (and is) fundamentally bound to place. Oliver's confrontation with her historically-rooted discomfort, and her imaginative *rapprochement* with Indian ways of being in nature, constitute the political grounding of the poems I will discuss here, and contribute indirectly to the intensity of many others where politics is not directly evident but where she seeks a holistic relationship to the world. Her treatment of Indians differs significantly from those of such major white male contemporaries and twentieth-century predecessors as Jerome Rothenberg, William Carlos Williams, and Gary Snyder; her poetry, like theirs, raises questions about the meanings of whites' literary responses to Native experience and culture.

Two early poems, "Learning About the Indians" (RSO 12) and "The Indians Visit the Museum" (RSO 25)¹, convey her uneasy recognition of how Indians are belittled by white people and institutions. The first recalls the performances of "White Eagle . . . or Mr. White," who was reduced to selling his dances for the edification or entertainment of children "in schoolrooms built / On Ohio's plains, surrounded by the graves / Of all our fathers, but more of his than ours." Her discomfort began when Mr. White's drum "bumped our blood, / And sent a strange vibration through the mind." What she saw then was a "shabby" salesman who "strutted" for money. Reflecting now, she recognizes the Indian's profound exile from the place of his fathers and alienation from the culture and language of their successors: the teachers called his performance "Extracurricular"; to the children it was "fun." But "as for Mr. White . . . he called it / Nothing at all as he packed his drums, and drove, / Tires screeching, out of the schoolyard into the night." In the first stanza the Indian is changed from a figure whose "strange" power moves the blood and minds of his audience to a diminished being, when he is identified as "Mr. White." The name is an ironic slap at the business-suited Indian who both in name and in his manner of making a living appears to have been taken over by the white world. Yet as he drives off into the night, at the poem's end, he seems to defy neat schoolroom certainties and to reclaim the integrity of difference that empowered him in the first stanza and still sets him apart from the children and their teachers, in a world mysterious and unknown to them.

In "The Indians Visit the Museum," Oliver laments the polite begging for justice to which four elderly representatives of "the sleeping tribes" have been reduced, but as she wishes that "they had come with drums and painted faces . . . ornate and proud / And like a definition of wild places," she seems inclined to impose her own image and meaning on them. The image does serve, though, to emphasize the effacement of Indians and their culture that relegates them to the museum. Effacement and relegation are further suggested by Oliver's repetition: "I wish . . . I wish," she begins, but the second stanza's reiterated imperative—the old chiefs "Must shake a thousand hands, / Must smile"—demonstrates the futility of wishing with the evidence of subjugation. Perhaps invited to the opening of an exhibit with a name like *Masks from a Vanished Past* or *Lore of the Little Miami*, they

smile into the "cheerful" faces of people who "profit from their blue and weedy lands." The old men's inability to make a decisive impression upon their white hosts is confirmed by another repetition: "Pride and pride only wins the careless heart," and their pride has faded as white dominance has asserted itself, even in the building of museums to enshrine their despoiled past. More defeated than White Eagle, who declined to be categorized, their lives have been "labeled," and by the end of the poem they have quietly disappeared: "The curator leans among the tomahawks and arrows, / Dreaming of his own life."

Through her references to specific historical events and people, both Indian and white, Oliver identifies herself as an American, and her burden as the history of white Americans' treatment of nature and the Indians. In two poems from *American Primitive*, "Ghosts" (28-30) and "Tecumseh" (77-78), she directly criticizes her white predecessors. "Ghosts" recalls the slaughter of the buffalo by nineteenth-century hunters shooting from passenger trains. The repeated question "Have you noticed?" demands that readers pay attention and respond to the poem's facts. Still, Oliver's own response, her only direct entry into the poem, is a dreamed escape, an (unanswered) plea for admission to the departed animals' "wild domains." The poem thus does not finally emerge from the elegiac mode. "Tecumseh," however, does not linger in wishful dreaming.

The Shawnee chief Tecumseh rejected the European-American idea of private land ownership, and argued that lands could not be sold or ceded without the consent of all tribal groups. He rallied thousands of warriors to resist the white appropriation of Indian lands in the territory (including Ohio) covered by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.² From the start, the poem that bears his name offers a challenge. Oliver again demands that we pay attention, telling us that "there's a sickness / worse than death and that's / forgetting what we should never forget." The key fact of the poem follows: "Tecumseh lived here." Each word is essential. This knowledge spurs questions whose all too well-known answers indict white Americans and their history: "Where are the Shawnee now? / Do you know? Or would you have to / write to Washington, and even then, / whatever they said, / would you believe it?" Oliver's immediate response is a despairing desire to ally herself with the defeated Indians. Sometimes she "would like to paint [her] body red and go out into / the glittering snow / to die." Temporarily, she buys into the myth of doomed "noble

savagery." But unlike "Ghosts," with its wishful dream, this poem returns to Tecumseh, who "vowed / to keep Ohio and it took him / over twenty years to fail." Even in death, his power is formidable. After the Battle of the Thames (1813) in which Tecumseh sided with the British against the U.S., "it was over, except / his body could not be found." We may, Oliver says, think what we will about that fact. But she ends the poem with one certainty: "If we ever meet him, we'll know it, / he will still be / so angry." Oliver's own anger at the history she has inherited is matched by the recognition that Indian anger, directed at people like her as well as at Washington, justifiably persists into the present.

Oliver comes to terms with her past by acknowledging her own inherited complicity in white domination and responsibility for earlier generations' actions; she acknowledges, too, the Indians' continuing anger. Facing this anger brings history into the present and makes impossible any complacent escape into self-indulgent "communion" with unpeopled nature, as she acknowledges in "Two Kinds of Deliverance" (DW 61-62). This poem witnesses to the "deliverance" of the earth from winter into spring, and of an old Indian, "in a kind of surly rapture," "smiling, hating us, / dancing for his life," angrily liberating himself, through his dance, from white civilization's denial and suppression of his culture. Here Oliver returns to the scene of "Learning About the Indians"; this old man, too, danced in a schoolhouse. But as he danced, distant trees "began to mutter and suck up their long roots. / Slowly they advanced until they stood / pressed to the schoolhouse windows." If the trees' revolt deepens the speaker's sense of pained guilt, the poem's beginning, which echoes the regenerating epiphany of Thoreau's *Walden* spring, conveys her deep desire for admission to the world from which her history seems to have barred her.³ This juxtaposition of pain and desire appears inevitable: the European-American's impulse to enter into nature is stripped of innocence by her history. Oliver both denies the Transcendentalist faith in the possibility of a completely fresh start, Thoreau's belief that we can live in "morning time," and yearns for such a new beginning. But a third kind of deliverance may be suggested when the speaker, anticipating the joy of future springs, finds that she cannot replace knowledge of "the pain of others" (specifically, of the old Indian and his people) with comfortable abstractions. Recognizing her escapism for what it is, she sees the old dancer, whose face "flares up out of the vanished

wilderness, like fire, / still blistering." Having begun, imaginatively, to feel his pain and his anger, she may hope for "deliverance" into a less compromised relationship with nature, her history, and the Indians. Poems from *Dream Work* and earlier books have moved toward that possibility, as she opened herself to the sensuous spirituality of nature, and to the influence of Native ways of knowing and being in the world.

In "The Lost Children" (AP 12-15), Oliver moves to correct the assumptions about the otherness of Indians and of nature that whites used to justify their displacement and destruction. In doing so, she is imaginatively re-educating herself—compensating for the mis-education she and most of her readers received in school. "The Lost Children" explicitly questions such assumptions. The children of the title wandered into the forest or were stolen from their frontier Ohio settlements. Lydia Osborn was never seen again; Isaac Zane, when grown to adulthood, "walked back / to the world and found himself / lost there," then returned to the woods to live for fifty years with his Indian love.⁴ Oliver sympathetically evokes the white parents' grief at "the terrible / possibilities," at the same time that she subtly suggests an alternative response. The possibilities are "terrible" when Lydia is simply lost, as her father searches "the edges of swamps, the desolations of the old / forest . . ." But the story of Isaac and the "beautiful dark woman" he loved intervenes before Lydia's story continues; then we learn that near her bonnet, searchers found "the hoofprints of Indian horses. And now, oh, / the possibilities are endless!" From her parents' perspective, the possibilities are now even more horrible. But Oliver suggests another version: "I think the girl / knelt down somewhere in the woods / and drank the cold water of some / wild stream, and wanted / to live . . ." Further, the speaker is sure she *knows* why the Wyandot chief, Tarhe, refused to barter anything for "Isaac, the captured boy, his delight. / I know. / He did it for his own sake." Yet she also likes to imagine that "he did it / for all of us." Oliver is capable of such imaginative knowledge because she recognizes the Indians as humans capable of love. This poem demonstrates her openness to an alternative perspective, and suggests the receptivity to Native influence that, together with her emotional responsiveness to nature, leads her to a holistic sense of reciprocal relationship akin to "the Indian's sense of oneness with the earth and with the creatures on it."⁵ Such Native influences are strongly suggested in three poems that evoke kinship with bears.

"Hunter's Moon—Eating the Bear" (TM 50-51), where the poet speaks as a hunter out for bear, seems directly influenced by Native American traditions. The hunter addresses the bear, the "good Friend," acknowledging their relationship and the reality that contains them both: "When I crouch beside the blades of fire, / holding a piece of your life on a knife-tip, / I will be leaning in like a spoke to the hub— / the dense orb that is all of us." The underlying image of the wheel here recalls the "sacred hoop," identified by Paula Gunn Allen as a central image of Native American spirituality. The sacred hoop implies a single, dynamic, encompassing unity that includes within it all of life. Related is "the tendency of the American Indian to view space as spherical and time as cyclical . . . [This] circular concept requires all 'points' that make up the sphere of being to have a significant identity and function . . ." Thus Allen observes, "Because of the basic assumption of the wholeness or unity of the universe, our natural and necessary relationship to all life is evident, all phenomena we witness within or 'outside' ourselves are, like us, intelligent manifestations of the intelligent universe from which they arise . . .".⁶ Similarly, in Oliver's poem, the continuity of all life (flesh and spirit) is evident as the hunter promises the bear, "You will come to live inside me: / muscle, layers of sweet leaves / hidden in the pink fat, the maroon flesh . . . in the small sinews of my prayers." Although the use of the pronouns "I" and "you" would appear to separate the speaker from the bear, nonetheless they remain united in the "dense orb," wrapped together in the enfolding landscape of shadows as the poem ends. The speaker's awareness of consanguinity and spiritual affinity contrasts strikingly with the pleasure in destruction for its own sake and the desire for financial gain that apparently motivated the railroad-carried hunters of "Ghosts."⁷

In "Winter Sleep" (TM 53), Oliver imagines another kind of intimacy with nature: "If I could I would / Go down to winter with the drowsy she-bear." Her desire is founded on a sense of sisterhood with the bear, and the conviction that the "family" relationship might enlarge her memory and enrich her poetry: "We would remember the freedoms of summer, / And we would begin to breathe together . . . A shy music, / Oh! a very soft song." A Native American sense of kinship with nature is suggested here, recalling the ways in which people and animals enter each others' worlds and lives, often by taking the others' forms, in many American Indian stories.⁸

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"Driving Through the Wind River Reservation: A Poem of Black Bear" (DW 31) doesn't wish for the physical enactment of a relationship, but tells a story, founded on the sure familiarity with Black Bear, that allows the speaker to imagine the animal's reality. As in "Winter Sleep," the bear is hibernating; similarly, too, the poem moves toward regeneration—this time realized in the birth of cubs. Here the Native American influences on the story, in the manner and tone of its telling, are more directly apparent. The title, as it refers to the bear, *naming* her as "Black Bear," rather than as "the" or "a" black bear, suggests both individuality and mythic significance and recalls the practice in many Native American stories of referring to "Crow," "Coyote," and so on.⁹ The poem's first line—"In the time of snow, in the time of sleep."—suggests the rhythms of oral telling and echoes the beginnings of traditional stories and narrative songs like the Pima "Song of the Fallen Deer": "At the time of the White Dawn; / At the time of the White Dawn."¹⁰ The extended personification of winter also suggests Native influence. Very rarely does Oliver use personification, but the device is common in Native material. Bierhorst observes that "Animals and objects . . . are believed to be imbued with a personifying spirit: for example, deer, water, wind, even hunger or disease. Translators who write the deer or the wind tend to obscure this quality," which is, however, represented clearly in the Pima "Wind Song" beginning, "Wind now commences to sing; / wind now commences to sing" (Bierhorst, 22). But the poem's ending most powerfully suggests a Native way of knowing the world and the sensibility of a Native teller that is more than the individual devices. With the booming of the frozen rivers, "a dampness / that could not be defeated began / to come from her, her breathing / enlarged, oh, tender mountain, she rearranged / herself so that the cubs / could slide from her body, so that the rivers / would flow." This recognition of holistic interdependency, fundamental to North American Native cultures, is now recognized by ecologically educated European-Americans as basic to any life-sustaining relationship with nature. Oliver's poetry suggests that for her such knowledge springs not only from her attentiveness to nature in its many forms, but also from her efforts to know her history, and to learn from her Indian predecessors in the places she calls home.

Michael Castro, in *Interpreting the Indian*, examines the responses of twentieth-century white poets (all males, with the single early exception of Mary Austin) to Indians.¹¹ Oliver seems to share with

writers like Austin, Neihardt, and Snyder their sense of intimate relationship to the land, and appreciation of the Indians' holistic awareness.¹² But in important ways her responses to Native Americans differ from those of the poets Castro discusses. Indians, for Oliver, are not symbols of the American land (as they are for Lindsay, Crane and Williams), nor does she imagine a mystical relationship with Indians, or create Indian-hued "earth mother" images as a way of claiming connection.¹³ In her poems, Indians are specific individuals, living or dead, who remind her of history and its present effects. But she does not (as Snyder and Lindsay do) deny her origins, curse or dismiss her forebears.¹⁴ Indians do seem to suggest to Oliver an alternative model of relationship to nature, which she enacts in "Hunter's Moon" and which contributes to the vision of poems like "Driving Through the Wind River Reservation." She is not, however, appropriating Native lives and beliefs to the purpose of an overarching interpretation. Neither is she "freely translating" or adapting their poetry, as did Rothenberg, whose anthologies could well have contributed to her interest in Native ways.¹⁵

But her avoidance of such forms of cultural arrogance notwithstanding, Oliver's poems raise questions that strangely echo those she asked so angrily in "Tecumseh": "Where are the Shawnee now? / Do you know? " Why are her living Indians old? Did she *stop* on the Wind River Reservation or see any Indian people? Do her poems in some sense buy into the myth of the Noble Savage after all? Or is her treatment of Native Americans appropriately tentative and non-presumptuous? As Oliver's poems generally do not concern human relationships other than the most intimate ones, it is fairly easy, and I think justifiable, to answer "yes" to the last question, let this writer of wonderfully moving and illuminating poetry off the hook, and avoid falling into the ranks of those who demand the right kind of politics of the writer. Nonetheless, such questions remain important, if perhaps unanswerable, for readers inclined to scrutinize the grounds of their own responses to literature and to the worlds that it opens to us. And they are the kind of questions that we all need to ask, as we come to terms with the plural realities of American literature and culture.

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NOTES

I am grateful to Doris Ann Bartlett and Elton Glaser for their suggestions, and to Ruth Clinefelter for historical information.

¹Oliver's poems will be identified in the text by page number and book: book titles are abbreviated as follows: RSO: *The River Styx, Ohio and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972); AP: *American Primitive* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983); TM: *Twelve Moons* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979); DW: *Dream Work* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).

²Wilcombe E. Washburn, *The Indian in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 158-59, 163-64; William Brandon, *The Last Americans* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1974), 307-8.

³I am thinking of the passage from "Spring" beginning "Walden is melting apace" and ending "A 'plump' of ducks rose at the same time and took the route to the north in the wake of their noisier cousins." See Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode, rev. edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1964), 551-53. Oliver's references to twilight and morning, returning geese, singing blackbirds, and the melting of the last ice from a pond, together with her tone, in this part of the poem, of celebratory awe and joy, all recall Thoreau's description of his first spring night and day in the woods.

⁴Isaac Zane's (1753-1816) story is part of the history of the early white settlement of Ohio; Lydia Osborn may also have been a historical figure. Again, Oliver is responding to the literal human history of her region. The story of Isaac Zane is told in Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Ohio* (Cincinnati, 1853), 304.

⁵Michael Castro, *Interpreting the Indian: Twentieth-Century Poets and the Native American* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983), 5.

⁶Paula Gunn Allen, *Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), 56-61.

⁷Thematically, "Hunter's Moon" might recall Galway Kinnell's earlier "The Bear" (from *Body Rags*, 1967, reprint, A. Poulin, Jr., ed., *Contemporary American Poetry*, 3rd ed., (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 221-24.) However, the poems differ, among other ways, in emphasis—Kinnell's stresses the process of killing the bear as much as that of entering its being—and in terms of the relationship imagined—Kinnell's speaker refers to the bear exclusively in the third person and otherwise maintains his distance from it.

⁸Examples are the Haida "Fish Story: Karta Bay," told by Victor Haldane, and the Chugach "A Bear Story," told by Walter Meganack, Sr., pp. 28-30 and 39-40, respectively, in *Alaska Quarterly Review* 4: 3-4 (1986); and the Mandan "The Man Who Married the Birds" and the Malecite "Tale," pp. 84-89 and 110, respectively, in William Brandon, ed., *The Magic World: American Indian Songs and Poems* (New York: William Morrow, 1971).

⁹Examples are the Athabaskan "Wolverine and the Wolves," told by John Fredson, in *Alaska Quarterly Review* 4: 3-4 (1986): 77-78; and the Hopi "Tale" of Coyote Old Man, pp. 44-46 in Brandon, *The Magic World*.

¹⁰John Bierhorst, ed., *In the Trail of the Wind: American Indian Poems and Ritual Orations* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), 57.

¹¹See note 5.

¹²For Austin, see Mary Hunter Austin, *The American Rhythm: Studies and Re-expressions of Amerindian Songs* (1923; reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), and Castro, 3842. For Neihardt, see John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (1932; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979); Neihardt, *Patterns and Coincidences* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978); and Castro, 79-97. For Snyder, see Gary Snyder, *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks 1964-1979* (New York: New Directions, 1980); Snyder, *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974); and Castro, 139-52.

¹³Vachel Lindsay, "In Praise of Johnny Appleseed" and "Our Mother Pocahontas," *Collected Poems*, Rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 82-90, 105-108, see also Castro, 49-55. Hart Crane, "The Bridge," *Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose*, ed. Brom Weber (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 43-117, especially "Powhatan's Daughter," 53-79; see also Castro, 55-59. William Carlos Williams, "The Desert Music," *Pictures from Breughel* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 108-120; *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1956); *Spring and All* (1923; reprint, New York: Frontier Press, 1970); see also Castro, 59-69.

¹⁴Leslie Marmon Silko criticizes white poets who deny their ancestry in "An Old-Time Indian Attack Conducted in Two Parts," *Yardbird Reader* 5 (1976), 77-84. See Lindsay, "Our Mother Pocahontas" and Snyder, "Dusty Braces," in *Turtle Island*; see also Castro, 164.

¹⁵Jerome Rothenberg, ed., *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the Indian North Americas* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972); *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, and Oceania* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969).